

[TRAVEL TIPS]

THE INTENTIONAL TOURIST



ROBERT KANE

**WRITES TRAVEL GUIDES THAT ARE
AS COMPREHENSIVE AND DETAILED
AS YOU'LL FIND. SO WHEN ON THE
TOURIST TRAIL, FOLLOW THIS SIMPLE
RULE: DON'T CHECK IN UNLESS KANE
CHECKED IT OUT.**

By Mary Ellen Mengucci

Robert Kane has stayed at Britain's Grand Hotel, but he recommends against it.

"The Grand Hotel has not, in my unhappy experience, proved very grand," he writes. "Enviably well-situated and impressively venerable (it goes back a century), it seems tired. Refurbishings notwithstanding, corridors need paint; and the restaurant at breakfast wants a more appetizing buffet and supervised staff. I would hope, too, for an offer of a bellman at check-in, for heavy baggage; a room doorlock that worked without having to call for staff help to effect entry; a toilet that flushed properly; a hall porter who would smile and provide requested information on train departures; a switchboard that would come through with an asked-for wake-up call; and a bedside lamp with a bulb strong enough to read by."

He suggests that, when in Switzerland, one take the train.

"A single expletive—Wow!—is in order for the Swiss train system. It embraces a 3,107-mile network that sees it speed through rolling countryside, climb steep mountains, zoom through tunnels as long as 12 miles (the Simplon), and—inevitably at journey's end, if my not inconsiderable experience is typical—arrive at the destination station *on the minute*. This is a brilliantly engineered, impeccably maintained, efficiently operated system right up there with the other European railroad leaders, the French and the Germans. You may travel virtually everywhere by train."

In Spain, you'll find relief in the shower.

"My hat is off to the Spanish plumbing industry. Bathrooms of Spanish hotels, luxury to budget, are invariably equipped with the kind of showers Americans like:

MARY ELLEN MENGUCCI is an associate editor of Syracuse University Magazine. She profiled photographer William Coupon for our September 1990 issue.





attached to the wall, with a wide nozzle. And shower curtains—so often absent in Continental European hotels, where showers are attached to rubber hoses that run wild when turned on.”

And when in France, along with those great sights and romantic accents, one can’t help noticing *les chiens*.

“Although they do not vote (at least, to my knowledge), dogs come close to being full-fledged French citizens. I have no figures, but there simply has to be a higher proportion of dogs—vis-à-vis the human

population—in France than in any other country. Certain restaurants deny them entry, but they go shopping with masters and mistresses, and rare is the hotel in France that does not have special rates *pour les animaux*. I have yet to meet a French dog that I did not like (they are invariably friendly and quite prepared to charm the pants off you). Which is not to say they all

have been properly trained. *Caveat: Watch where you walk.*”

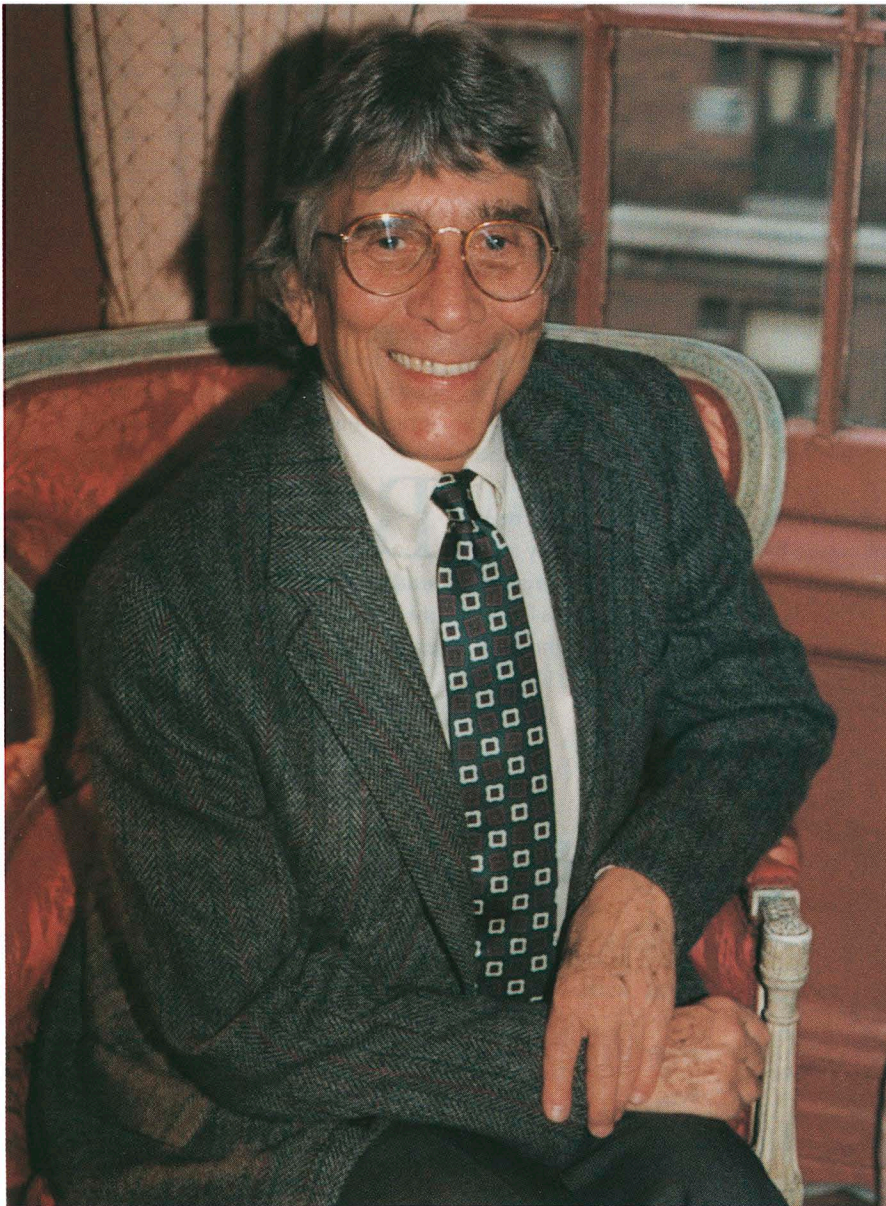
It’s a Thursday afternoon in December and Robert Kane is sitting in his New York City apartment, chatting modestly about his 25-plus years as a travel writer. He mentions some of his recent and upcoming excursions—Britain, Mexico, Washington, D.C., Spain, and Hong Kong—but he can squeeze no more from his memory. “Those are the major trips, anyway,” he says matter of factly. It can be difficult to remember every trip when you travel for a living.

Soon, he’s expounding on, of all things, packing a suitcase. He always uses a compartmentless, 26-inch bag (made by a California firm called the French Company, to be exact). Inside he packs his suitcoats, shirts, and trousers as flat as possible. He always includes a sweater, in case of inclement weather. Kane neatly rolls his neckties and places them with his shoes, notebooks, maps, and other belongings in—his trick—separate clear bags. This enables him to locate items quickly, and helps to keep his bag organized and his clothes wrinkle-free.

Though he has a system down pat, he readily admits his dislike for the task. “I loathe packing,” he says, rolling his eyes. He particularly dislikes preparing for trips that require several types of clothing for sundry weather conditions and activities—dress clothes and beachwear, shorts and sweaters, heavy coats and light jackets.

“For instance, when I leave for my trip to Spain this week—when is that?” he asks himself and then answers. “Oh, my, that’s tomorrow. I guess I’d better get packing.”

MARY ELLEN MENGUCI



Robert Kane, photographed in his Manhattan apartment, is more likely to be elsewhere. His career as a travel writer draws him to the four corners of the earth. One moment he’s here, and the next he’s not.

Whoops. Robert Kane can momentarily forget an overseas trip the way you forget your dry cleaning. But it's to his credit, because those many, many years in the field only enhance his ability to tell it like it is. His jetting from continent to continent has made him anything but blasé about travel—rather a keen observer and critic. He knows nearly every trick of the travel trade—where to go, what to see, and how to best spend time and money.

At first glance, Kane's job—writing books and articles about faraway places and adventurous lands—seems glamorous, even romantic. It's a lifestyle many of us dream about.

Kane runs into people like us all the time, and he finds himself gently reminding us that what he does is indeed work. "When you meet somebody new, who is not in the business, they say, 'Oh, what a fabulous job. Gee it must be great fun.' I do enjoy my work," Kane admits. "It's very satisfying and I am very pleased with the books. . . . But it is hard work, whether you're writing a cookbook, or a novel, or this kind of book."

In fact, Kane, like any other person working for a living, experiences days when he'd rather not work at all. "You may want to say, 'Oh, I don't want to bother with lunch today,' or 'I'll just have a sandwich.'" But because Kane's time in each location is limited, he must eat every meal at a differ-

ent restaurant (sometimes in jacket and tie), even when he might prefer to do something else (lie on the beach and skip lunch, for example). "Every restaurant and every meal is planned in advance. And each one counts," he says.

Just exactly how does one make a living writing about other places? In Kane's case, it means traveling approximately four months a year, usually in economy class (like most of his readers). It means reading no more than the headlines when an airplane crashes. It helps if you're bilingual—Kane speaks French and some Spanish, though he admits it's no longer a necessity for the average traveler. It means occasional flight delays and lost luggage. It means thorough research and planning prior to a trip—even paying bills in advance. And once Kane reaches his destination, it means visiting, staying, inspecting, or dining at each place he writes about.

The nature of Kane's job requires him to move frequently, sometimes at a whirlwind pace, to provide his readers with as much information as he can about accommodations in a particular area. "Three days in a hotel is a great luxury. I try to stay two-night stands. I hate to stay one-night stands," he says with a chuckle.

When Kane inspects a hotel other than one where he is staying, he generally asks the assistant manager on duty to provide him with a tour. He brings one of his books with him (which pictures Kane on the back

cover) for identification. "Otherwise," he says, "I find that they may think you're a nut or that you're going to blow the place up." In addition, Kane carries his press identification cards and, in some cases, a letter from the appropriate tourism bureau, with which he works closely in most countries.

When Kane dines at a restaurant or café, he does so anonymously. Usually, he says, "They don't know who I am until the end of the meal when I ask if I can take the interior of the menu with me." This way he feels he receives the same type of service that one of his readers is apt to experience.

All this eating can put on the pounds, though, so Kane rarely samples more than one dessert a day, and often eats only one or two courses at a restaurant. "And of course, in this business, you walk a great deal. It helps some," he says in a resigned manner. "It doesn't help as much as it should."

To keep track of all his discoveries, Kane carries several pocket-size notebooks with him on each trip, and fills them with notes. Whenever he can, he jots notes directly on a menu, hotel brochure, or a museum guidebook. This, he says, makes the sorting and writing process a little easier when he returns home to begin work on a book.

Born in Albany, New York, Kane had traveled relatively little until World War II and the Navy interrupted his studies at SU and took him to Hawaii and the Pacific—albeit under less than ideal conditions—on his first real adventure.



A KEEN OBSERVER

AND CRITIC, ROBERT KANE KNOWS NEARLY EVERY

TRICK OF THE TRAVEL TRADE—WHERE TO GO,

WHAT TO SEE, AND HOW TO BEST SPEND TIME

AND MONEY.

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NESS AND EASY-GOING NARRATIVE STYLE.

HE TELLS HIS READERS, "BEAR IN MIND THAT
I AM FUSSY."

KANE'S BOOKS



After the war, Kane returned to Syracuse and graduated in 1947 with a degree in journalism. He landed his first job with a newspaper in Kansas, by placing an advertisement about himself in *Editor and Publisher*: "I got several replies, but the most interesting was from the *Great Bend Daily Tribune*." So Kane packed his bags and headed west on what was one of many journeys yet to come. "I felt like Judy Garland and the Harvey Girls," he says. "I was going out to the Wild West."

After a year, Kane left the paper to complete graduate work at England's Southampton University, where he studied contemporary British history. It was there, during class field trips to the Hampshire countryside, that Kane first began taking notes about his surroundings.

When he returned to the States, Kane worked first for the *Staten Island Advance* and then the *New York Herald Tribune*, where, in the mid-fifties, he started to carve a niche for himself as a travel writer. It started slowly—a travel piece here and there—but eventually Kane was writing about travel on a full-time basis, including during his vacations.

His first book, *Africa A to Z*, evolved after he completed a six-month job in Africa writing feature pieces for a small wire service. Kane realized he had collected enough information to compile a book, and he created the first-ever American-published travel guide for post World War II Africa.

"Africa is not a conventional continent," he writes in the introduction to the book,

"and this is not a conventional travel guide. Negative opinions are expressed, and the Golden Rule of the American Travel Writer has been violated: there are allusions to political situations. These are coupled with personal reactions, as well as historical and cultural background—all of which complement the core of the book: factual material which, it is hoped, will help the prospective visitor, as well as the armchair traveler, whose curiosity may be whetted—at least in part—by a concise, nutshell picture of contemporary Africa."

Published by Doubleday in the early sixties, it became the first in his series of *A to Z* travel books. There were seven *A to Z*'s in all, the others covering Asia, the South Pacific, South America, Canada, the Capitals of Europe, and Eastern Europe.

Meanwhile, Kane's byline continued to appear in such publications as *Travel & Leisure*, *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, the *New York Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. He began receiving awards for his work (including the Society of American Travel Writers' Best Travel Book of the Year award) and served as president of both that society and the New York Travel Writer's Association.

In the mid-eighties, Kane began work on his newest series, *'The World At Its Best' Travel Guides*, which provide insights and criticisms on places from Holland and Italy to Switzerland and Germany. *Washington D.C. At Its Best*, the 12th in the series, will be released this spring by Passport Books.

Kane's books repeatedly receive accolades for their thoroughness and easy-going

narrative style. He organizes them logically, so that a traveler need not fumble for information. Kane divides each book into chapters on specific cities or locations and provides in-depth information about hotels, restaurants, cafés, galleries, churches, and more; and he rates places as luxury, first-class, or moderate. He tells his readers, "Bear in mind that I am fussy."

Most books also contain an alphabetized mini-briefing about the country, city, or state as a whole—details about currency, time zones, transportation methods, climates, culture, and history. Usually, this is as entertaining as it is informative. For instance, Kane writes this about peddlers in New York: "During the warm-weather months, streets of Manhattan—the center mainly but to the north and south as well—are literally littered with vendors of oft-unappetizing-appearing and -smelling edibles, the while colleagues occupy valuable sidewalk space with assorted wares often of dubious quality, the only ones of which I must admit to liking are unabashedly phony species of name-brand watches (reportedly made in Taiwan) sold mostly by kindly Senegalese (you may make your purchase in French, if you like); my fake 'Rolex,' which set me back all of 20 bucks, (you bargain with these guys) is now in its second year."

New York At Its Best is, in fact, Kane's most recent book. Though it is about his home city, the book took him the longest of any to complete. "I have to concede," he writes in the forward, "that this book has



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not been the 'piece of cake' I termed it when my Chicago-based publishers requested it. . . . Indeed, this is the book that has kept me at home for a longer period than I have known since I began chronicling the travel scene a quarter-century back. Friends and colleagues have not been surprised, correctly conjecturing that when you pen a guide to your adopted city, you know too much about it in many respects, and not enough about it, in others."

Maybe so, but Kane's unique ability to experience a place without rose-colored glasses still shines through. He writes about one popular eatery: "The Carnegie Deli has managed to achieve so much publicity over the years that out-of-town and foreign customers stand in lines easily a block long, and even in the rain, to order what has to be the most expensive corned beef and pastrami sandwiches served in any deli of which I am aware. Business is apparently so good that management does not feel the need to redecorate; even a single coat of paint would be welcome. I'll be damned if I would wait out in the street to order a sandwich in an unattractive environment such as this."

When talking to Kane, "my latest" may refer to any one of three books, such is his pace. With *New York* recently released and *Washington* on its way, Kane is now working on *Hong Kong At Its Best*, scheduled for release at the end of 1991 or early 1992. He

recently returned from a five-week trip there, and he's busy sorting through notes, brochures, and menus he collected.

It's the dead of winter and the sub-zero temperatures and icy winds in the Northeast this time of year are enough to make any New Yorker consider a trip elsewhere. So where does a man who has traveled to more than 100 countries and all the continents go when he wants to take a vacation?

Kane chooses Hawaii. Though it has changed enormously since he first visited the small Pacific islands during World War II, he never passes up a chance to revisit. "Hawaii is still beautiful," he writes in *Hawaii At Its Best*. "And not only as regards swaying palms, white-sand beaches, and the silhouettes of Diamond Head or Mauna Loa. What continues to make it special is its amalgam of people and their immediately likeable lifestyle—unlike any other in any other American state."

Kane says, "Hawaii works so well because it is an American state and the standard of living is relatively high and everybody you're dealing with is a fellow American. The Caribbean is another scene. It's just not nearly as well operated or efficient." He cites also the social-class problems there, which create unfortunate tensions for both vacationers and the people of the Caribbean. "I've always enjoyed going

to the Caribbean," he says, "but anybody who's gone to Hawaii first immediately sees what the good ole U.S.A. is about."

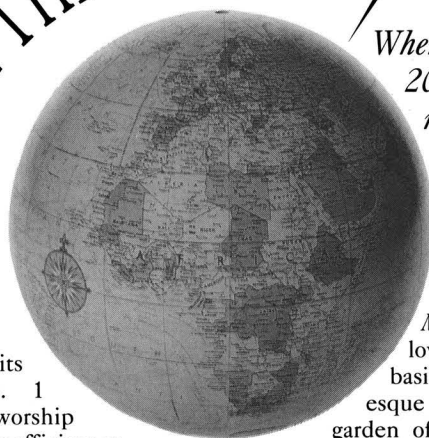
You might think that someone who travels for a living would choose to stay put during his vacations. But Kane says trekking across the world is so much a part of him now that, despite the time changes and the jet lag, he seldom tires of it.

"Every trip for me is a big deal," he says. "I always look forward to travel, whether it's a weekend, or a week, or a month, or whatever. I always look forward to it and I always am wondering if it is going to work well. . . . I think with anybody there's always a degree of anxiety and anticipation before you go off on a trip."

Kane says travel simply refreshes people and, like his readers, he finds multiple benefits in venturing around the world. "People travel because it's a welcome change from the familiar home scenes, people, jobs, and tasks. There's a kind of status value to travel and I think that people feel a sense of achievement when they travel to well-known places, either here in this country or abroad."

Caveat: Remember to pack a guide book when you go. ■

ROME THIS SUMMER



CITTA VATICANO

San Pietro.

"Laying aside its function as No. 1 Catholic place of worship (only the pope may officiate at mass from the high altar), it's Rome at its most reassuring, its most stable, yes—even more so than the core-of-town remnants of the ancient empire—its most eternal."

Cappella Sistina. "If your visit is a summer one, prepare for a mob scene in the Sistine. Indeed, every part of it except the ceiling—which Michelangelo began painting in 1508, and which was the subject of a controversial 1980s restoration—will be occupied. . . . But the Sistine is, more than anything else, Michelangelo, a masterwork that even upon repeated visits remains one of the great interiors of a city where great interiors are commonplace. The crowds are understandable."

ANCIENT ROME

Colosseo. "The Colosseum is sufficiently intact to be appreciated for what it was: seat of the action, with gladiators vs. lions and other fun and games, dating back to the first century, and with a seating capacity of some 50,000—not bad if you consider that ancient Rome had a population of about a million."

Pantheon. "It is difficult to believe that work was begun on the Pantheon almost three decades before Christ was born. It is the only 100-percent shipshape ancient Roman building. Its domed, colonnaded exterior is in such good shape that it could be neo-classic. But it's the real thing."

TWO MAJOR BASILICAS

Santa Maria Maggiore. "It is the major church in Rome named for St. Mary, of many, many, many. . . . It's a mix of styles, with a Baroque façade, a Renaissance campanile (the tallest in town), and a multi-period interior with a magnificent coffered ceiling, fine mosaics, a number of chapels,

When in Rome, do like Robert Kane does. The author of 20-plus travel guides, including Italy At Its Best, recommends these must-sees.

and, as in the case of all major basilicas, tremendous scale."

San Paolo Fuori le Mura. "This is the loveliest of the major basilicas, with a Romanesque cloister that frames a garden of quiet charm, and a mosaic frieze of popes, St. Peter to John XXIII."

A PAIR OF REQUISITE MUSEUMS

Museo Nazionale Romano—Baths of Diocletian. "Comprises the baths themselves—a complex of high-ceilinged, splendidly proportioned halls and patios, built 17 centuries ago (when it accommodated some 3,000 bathers)—and a collection of classical art."

Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica—Palazzo Barberini. "Is one of two component parts of the national ancient-art museum. It is sumptuous Baroque. . . . Barberini's treasures are abundant—Tintoretto's *Jesus and the Adulterous Woman*; Lotto's *Portrait of a Young Man*; Raphael's seductive lady, *La Fornarina*; Piero di Cosimo's exquisite *La Maddalena*; Titian's *Venus and Adonis*; a Holbein of Henry VIII."

A RENAISSANCE PALACE

Palazzo Farnese. "Was begun in 1514 by Antonio Sangallo the Younger—using building materials from the Colosseum, of all places. But it was completed by Michelangelo. The entire structure is a work of genius—architectural proportions, arched entrance vestibule, super-high ceilings, frescoed and tapestried reception rooms."

A SQUARE AND A FOUNTAIN

Piazza Navona. "No Italian city, indeed no European city, is more beautifully endowed with these beloved appurtenances of urban life. Piazza Navona is the most romantic in town."

Fontana di Trevi. "It's the richest such in the world, ever since the world learned from a film, *Three Coins in the Fountain*,

back in the 1950s, of the old legend decreeing that if you threw a coin into Trevi (presumably with your back to it) you were bound to return to Rome."

A SUBURBAN EXCURSION

Villa d'Este at Tivoli. "The house is a fine Renaissance country villa, but in and of itself, it would never draw the crowds that come. They want to see the fountain-filled formal gardens. If one excepts Petrovoretts, Peter the Great's horticultural fantasy at his country palace outside Leningrad, there is nothing else—anywhere—that can touch them."

AN IN-TOWN CASTLE

Castel Sant' Angelo. "It's a Roman surprise package, at least to the many visitors who believe that the ancient circular mausoleum-cum-fortress-cum-papal-palace on the right bank of the Tiber near the Vatican is today no more than a historical landmark, to be admired for its derring-do façade. Well step inside."

AN ART-FILLED PALACE

Palazzo Corsini. "The palazzo continues underappreciated. Located on the right bank of the Tiber, near Trastevere, it went up in the early 18th century for Pope Clement XII's family, replacing an earlier palace that had been the home of Sweden's self-exiled Queen Christina in the 17th century."

THE FORUMS

The Forums. "The Roman (the original) and Imperial (its successor) forums are ruins of the ancient city, in part restored. Many visitors content themselves with vistas of the contiguous area they occupy, from a distance. A better way to take in this beautiful area is to walk down Via dei Fori Imperiali, linking the Colosseum and Piazza Venezia with the Roman Forum on one side and the Imperial Forums on the other."

For more information about these and other sights in Rome, refer to Robert Kane's Italy At Its Best, published by Passport Books, a division of the NTC Publishing Group. Copyright ©1989 by Robert S. Kane.